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The Real Story of Haiti's Forests

Changing the narrative around deforestation and charcoal in Haiti

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Deforestation and charcoal production are often seen as the principal culprits for the endemic poverty in Haiti. This essay calls for a new narrative. Not only is this picture of Haiti incomplete and inaccurate, it is also counterproductive to the economic development of the country.

Haiti : away from clichés

The Republic of Haiti, widely recognized as the first free black republic in the new world, occupies the westernmost third of the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea. At the international level, Haiti is mostly well known for the destructive natural disasters it suffers and its tumultuous political life. It made the headlines in February 2004 when its President Jean-Bertrand Aristide flew into exile and in January 2010 when a 7.3 earthquake stroke its capital city, Port-au-Prince, killing hundreds of thousands and displacing millions. More recently, the international attention focused on the cholera outbreaks, the presidential election (postponed several times until early 2017), and category 5 Hurricane Matthew that devastated the south of the country in October 2016.

In spite of its rich history and culture, Haiti remains the poorest country in the western hemisphere and is frequently associated with visions of impoverishment, violence and extreme deforestation. In 1987, *National Geographic* called the public attention to the asymmetric deforestation crisis between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where gas constitutes the primary fuel source while Haiti's fuel consumption mostly relies on charcoal. Since the 1980s, deforestation has been one of the few images widely circulated by mainstream media that shape the international perception on Haiti.

For decades, media, political actors, international institutions and researchers have been publicizing these stereotypes on deforestation in Haiti. The result is a public image of Haiti amounting to a cliché of simplistic, causal narratives that links deforestation to entrenched poverty and instability, while placing the blame almost exclusively on charcoal producers, a heterogeneous group made up largely of rural, agrarian peasants who are among the most vulnerable members of society. Even worse, development projects are often based upon this narrative, leading to ineffective and inefficient actions to attempt to reforest Haiti that often only exacerbate the problem in the long run and ignore real opportunities to work with existing production systems in rural areas.

This infamous narrative around deforestation and charcoal production in Haiti both ignores current production and consumption practices and is almost entirely divorced from the colonial and post-revolutionary past. However, this discourse has shown resistance over time; the anthropologist Andrew Tarter demonstrates how the oft-cited but unsubstantiated 2% forest cover figure in Haiti has been maintained by occurrences in multiple well-known publications since the 1980s, in spite of an inability to link it to a verifiable source. The journalist M. R. O'Connor also talks of a "chain of dissemination" to describe how statistics on the extreme deforestation of Haiti have been circulated over decades. The perpetuation of this unquestioned narrative prevents a true examination of the dynamics around deforestation, charcoal production and poverty in Haiti, leading to poorly informed responses by the Haitian government, private initiatives and the international development community.

An Inaccurate Picture

In her recent book *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives*, Gina Athena Ulysse questions "narratives that reduce Haiti to simple categories", often based on ahistorical, uninformed and socio-culturally limited assumptions. In the case of deforestation and charcoal, the narrative is problematic for several reasons.

First, the most-often mentioned data on deforestation is inaccurate. In their 2014 study, Churches et al. shows that the approximate tree cover in Haiti is about a third of the country, far from the 2% usually quoted. Other studies focused on La Gônave (Haiti's largest island) and on the Greater Antilles region have come to similar conclusions. The dominant narrative also tends to overlook the actual lack of data in regards to the tree cover before the Europeans' arrival. In 1945, a forester, quoted by Tarter, already wrote: "The appearance of many of the inland smaller mountains and plateaus does not indicate that they ever supported much forest growth".

Secondly, this narrative relies on an oversimplification of the vegetal cover in Haiti. It also simplifies the forest energy supply chain. As UN Environment's latest report on the issue

shows, the dominant discourse misunderstands the economic role of charcoal production in rural areas, as well as indigenous methods of production and management of wood resources. It dismisses the familial and communally managed wood resources – "rak bwa" or "lots boisés"[1] – which provide a significant source for charcoal that leaves the remaining forests in Haiti intact. It also disregards the fact that the greatest pressures on forests are largely due to high demand for agricultural space, the inevitable results of low productivity and lack of investment and sound policies in the agricultural sector.

Thirdly, the dominant discourse is disconnected from historical and roots causes of deforestation in Haiti. First, the French empire was responsible for a significant part of the removal of virgin forests in Haiti for sugar cane plantations in the 17th and 18th centuries; according to Tarter, references to charcoal production appeared in the literature only in the 1920-30s. The agronomist Alex Bellande adds that it only became significant in the 1970s. The Haiti historian Laurent Dubois also documented the perpetuation of this destructive agricultural system by governing elites, despite the reluctance from rural populations. According to Bellande and O'Connor, deforestation is also the result of the trade of mahogany and other precious hard woods, notably used to reimburse the indemnity France imposed to Haiti as a consequence of its independence.

While the US occupation of Haiti between 1915-1934 also impacted deforestation rates, forest loss accelerated in the 1940s-50s through a confluence of causes: increase in population and urban demands, an anti-superstition campaign led by the Catholic church, and government projects tailored to short-term global market interests. For instance, a Haitian-American project destroyed millions of trees near Jérémie to plant rubber trees, a valued commodity during the Second World War, which brought no financial benefits since the production came on line only after the end of the war. A few decades later, Duvalier later cleared the border area with the Dominican Republic, often referred to as the primary evidence of Haiti's lack of trees, for security reasons and policing control.

Today, agriculture and agroforestry practices, property rights and the fragmentation of land ownership are key to understand wood demand and supply chains. Deforestation in Haiti is the result of a long history with internal and external influences and with complex ramifications that go far beyond the production and trade of charcoal.

A Risky Framing for Tackling Deforestation

The propagation of this inaccurate and incomplete narrative has subsequently led to poorly informed responses by the Haitian government and the international development

[1] Tarter, Andrew. 2015. "Adaptive Arboreal Practices: Haitian Farmer Responses to Ongoing Deforestation." PhD dissertation, University of Florida.

community that fail to address the underlying issues of deforestation and focus responsibility on some of the country's most vulnerable populations. For example, the government of Haiti has issued bans on the production and sale of charcoal while neglecting to promote or increase alternative forms of income in rural areas (i.e. investments in agriculture or small businesses) or alternative cooking fuels in urban ones (electricity supply is sporadic and unreliable and LPG is difficult to procure outside of the most major urban centers). This regulatory approach relies heavily on enforcement by the police, who already struggle with a lack of capacity and resources to carry out their most basic duties in Haiti, and ignores the fact that charcoal is the dominant cooking fuel for a population of over 10 million people.

The international development community, including donors, NGOs and the UN, has frequently sought to address the issue with well-meaning but under-informed projects[2] on reforestation or through indirect approaches such as alternative cooking stoves. While there are some interesting and highly successful experiences of reforestation in Haiti (i.e. the one led by the anthropologist Gerald Murray in 1980s, or the Maniche PADF project) the largest and most well-resourced projects tend to miss the connection between local wood resource management systems, rural economies, and dismiss the larger threat that agriculture poses to existing forests. In turn, as Murray already showed in 1987, they ignore the realities and needs of the local populations and charcoal producers, or simply do not plan for the basic project elements needed to ensure long-term success, such as irrigation of seedlings and protection from livestock once they are planted.

The approach to reducing deforestation through alternative cookstoves, which require less charcoal to operate, has several flaws. For one, it attempts to tackle the issue indirectly (i.e., working on cookstove distribution in urban areas), rather than directly (i.e., working with charcoal producers in rural areas). Secondly, interventions lack a solid understanding as to how the charcoal supply chain operates and therefore miss key opportunities to develop sustainable production and management models for wood resources in rural areas. Ultimately, this approach fails to support rural economies and provide alternatives to agricultural practices that threaten remaining forests.

The cookstove approach to fighting deforestation is one of losing battles; the singular focus on cookstoves aims to achieve the daunting task of replacing culturally ingrained ways of cooking with alternatives that are costlier, less familiar, and which do not work as efficiently; and it completely cuts out the charcoal producers, who are the main stakeholders of any efforts to reduce deforestation.[3] As in other countries around the world, Haitians are not likely to change their cooking methods until a technology or fuel source that is superior to what they already have is introduced. It is clear that alternative cookstoves do not demonstrate

[2] For a broader perspective on international interventions in the fields of development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding, see for instance the work of Séverine Autesserre, Mark Duffield, James Ferguson, and David Mosse.

[3] Some of these flaws were highlighted in the 2014 audit of USAID/Haiti's improved cooking technology program aiming to reduce coal consumption.

any impact on charcoal production in rural areas, as evidenced by the lack of success of such projects in Haiti to date.

Furthermore, the poor success rate of these projects adds to the driving narrative on the crisis of deforestation in Haiti. As a result, donors exhibit a certain fatigue when it comes to funding additional reforestation efforts that never seem to change the overall situation on the ground. Despite a growing interest and demonstrable results, approaches that focus on proven successes of family and communally managed wood lots for sustainable charcoal production have difficulty finding traction amongst the donor community. This is largely because international donors are still informed by the simplistic and inaccurate narrative that has largely ignored these indigenous and effective approaches to tree and soil cover.

Finally, and most insidiously, the dominant discourse publicized in mainstream media and in international development reports shifts the responsibilities of deforestation in Haiti to the most vulnerable. By framing charcoal as the main cause of deforestation in the country, the narrative tends to place the blame on people who use and sell charcoal, while ignoring the policies, political and economic actors and power relationships that keep the rural, agricultural economy under-developed. In his recent book *Haïti déforestée, paysages remodelés*, the agronomist Alex Bellande challenges this narrative by documenting the long history of deforestation in Haiti. He shows precisely that the wrongful condemnation of farmers excludes them from contributing significantly to real solutions. Even if the vulnerability of these populations is acknowledged when justifying their use of charcoal, the narrative still places poverty at the heart of environmental degradation. As the political ecologist Paul Robbins shows, poor people's use of trees has been consistently criminalized throughout the 20th century, and the Haitian case does not escape this rule.

Changing the Narrative

The long-lasting dominance of the 2% figure can be explained, as Tarter shows, by the lack of access, until recently, to proper data and the strict definitions applied to forests[4]. Yet, the narrative on deforestation and charcoal in Haiti also continues because it serves political interests.

[4] While, in 2010, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated 4% national forest cover in Haiti, Church et al. applied FAO's definition to their data and found a tree-covered area of 29.4%. They suggest that "the best explanation for the significant difference between our results, FAO statistics, and compared datasets is the accuracy of the data sources and the resolution of the imagery used for land cover analyses". In a 2017 notice of funding opportunity for a reforestation project, USAID also used recent datasets and concludes on "a possible range of existing forest cover in Haiti between 9-11%, including agroforestry", despite relying on stringent forest cover definitions.

First, the explanation of charcoal as the main cause of deforestation is intuitive and easy to sell. International organizations and NGOs, as well as the national government, can attract funding with a clear problem that is purported to be simple to address through reforestation programs, such as the current Haiti Takes Roots programme promoted by Sean Penn's organization, J/P HRO, and others. Their intervention is legitimated by what O'Connor calls a "convenient narrative". This simplistic narrative has long been used to justify the intervention of external actors and to rationalize agriculture policies that neglect rural interests.

More importantly, the simplistic approach to a mischaracterized "extreme deforestation problem" contributes to a global discourse on the supposed instability of Haiti. It maintains the idea that the country is in a state of permanent environmental crisis, thereby legitimizing interventions that are often based on incomplete or inaccurate information. The "apocalypse of Haiti" justifies international interventions, instead of acknowledging Haiti's vulnerability "as part of a larger trend of global inequality", like the Dominican American writer Junot Díaz exhorted after the 2010 earthquake. For all of these reasons, changing the narrative is a difficult endeavor: it is less politically convenient and it does not match the general narrative about Haiti centered on a country destined to be a deforested, apocalyptic wasteland, as predicted in a 1979 report commissioned by USAID.

International organizations also play a significant role in producing and disseminating narratives which structure the way we understand and perceive the world. In the case of Haiti, they have undeniably participated in this dominant discourse on deforestation and charcoal. Conversely, they can actively contribute to changing the narrative, as the recent example of UN Environment (UNEP) suggests.

A 2016 study by UN Environment in Haiti's South Department, where some of the last native, primary forest of Haiti remains, concluded that the production of charcoal could be successfully addressed through sustainable, local production systems that support the rural economy. In these conclusions, UN Environment highlighted proven and effective approaches, which struggle to reach the dominant discourse on charcoal in the country. As Tarter also shows, the production of charcoal through sustainable local wood lots that are integrated into local agro-forestry systems correctly puts the focus on rural livelihoods, which are at the heart of the charcoal issue in Haiti. This approach can serve to empower producers and to attract investment to improve a supply chain with potential but which is under developed. It would consequently put charcoal producers in the role of positive contributors rather than perpetrators or victims, as also suggested by Dubois and Bellande. The work of UN Environment, along with a similar study produced by the World Bank, and the rich and complete analysis published by Bellande, fuels the recent media attention on the well-documented criticisms that are challenging the dominant narrative.

Changing the narrative around deforestation and charcoal can also give an active role to the Haitian rural population. In line with Joan Martinez-Allier's work on the

environmentalism of the poor, it draws the attention to the most vulnerable communities. It shows how the fight against deforestation is coherent with an environmentalism of livelihood "concerned not only with economic security in the market sphere but also concerned with non-market access to environmental resources and services". Going beyond the classical victim or culprit narrative, it brings agency built on local knowledge and calls for appropriate and holistic policies to enhance and promote local initiatives.

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